

GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL
OPENING REMARKS
JEDDAH, SAUDI ARABIA
WEDNESDAY, MAY 14, 2014

I want to thank Crown Prince Salman for graciously hosting this event in Saudi Arabia. Expanding cooperation in the Gulf region, and ensuring a strong U.S. military presence to help support it, are priorities for President Obama...and they are priorities for me.

That is why this visit is my third trip to the Gulf in just over a year. And it is why I have worked with Secretary-General Zayani to convene this dialogue, which I hope becomes an annual security consultation, and the backbone for renewed cooperation among all the nations of the GCC.

In 1979, my friend Harold Brown, the first Secretary of Defense to make an official visit to this region, said here in Saudi Arabia that your nations “have a new role to play in the world...[and] new power to wield with the responsibility which comes from centuries of Islamic religious tradition and...honor.” Secretary Brown also promised the United States would help to support that new role.

We all know the GCC has confronted setbacks and challenges. But, step by step, your cooperation has fostered a common identity and common interests. And it has helped protect your common security.

In recent years, the United States’ defense cooperation with the nations of this region has dramatically expanded. And America remains steadfast in its commitment to your security.

This has been demonstrated by the United States Central Command’s continued, forward military presence, which includes 35,000 personnel; our Navy’s 5th Fleet; our most advanced fighter aircraft; our most sophisticated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets; and a wide array of missile defense capabilities.

It has also been demonstrated by recent defense sales agreements, including some of the largest in American history. And General Austin will discuss some proposals to expand joint exercises and activities.

The United States remains firmly committed to our bilateral defense cooperation with Gulf nations. However, America’s bilateral ties and military presence are not enough.

As I said at the Manama Dialogue last December, “America’s engagement with Gulf nations is intended to support and facilitate, not replace, stronger multilateral ties within the GCC.”

That is because the most pressing security challenges threaten this region as a whole – and they demand a collective response.

By strengthening the GCC, you will ensure that your collective defense is more than the sum of its parts. You will strengthen your ability to prevent and deter aggression. You will strengthen, not weaken, each of your nations’ sovereignty. And you will expand your common interests – not just in defense, but in a more stable and prosperous future.

This approach is how the region must continue to address the threats posed by Iran.

As we meet here today, diplomats from the United States and other P5+1 nations are in Vienna, working to see if our concerns with Iran’s nuclear program can be resolved diplomatically.

We got to Vienna thanks to our collective efforts to isolate Iran diplomatically and economically, and to deter it militarily. And as negotiations progress, I want to assure you of two things.

First, these negotiations will under no circumstances trade away regional security for concessions on Iran’s nuclear program. Our commitment to Gulf security and stability is unwavering.

Second, while our strong preference is for a diplomatic solution, the United States will remain postured and prepared to ensure that Iran does not acquire a nuclear weapon – and that Iran abides by the terms of any potential agreement.

No matter the outcome of the nuclear negotiations, the United States remains committed to our Gulf partners' security.

We will continue to consult closely with you as these negotiations progress – as I am doing here today. We will continue to hold Iran accountable for its destabilizing activities across the region. And we will continue working closely with all of our friends and partners in the Gulf to reinforce their defenses against these destabilizing activities.

My proposals today – focused on air and missile defense, maritime security, and cyber security – should make America's commitment clear.

Beyond Iran, we face violent extremism, fragile states, and humanitarian emergencies. We see the confluence of all three in the tragic conflict in Syria, where the United States remains committed to working with your governments toward a negotiated, political solution that ends the violence and leads to a representative and responsive government. And we remain deeply concerned by the efforts of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant to destabilize Iraq.

No one nation can address these threats alone. Our efforts must be coordinated and complementary.

Our agenda today reflects this need to cooperate more closely on the region's most urgent challenges.

Our first session will allow us to discuss the common threats we confront throughout the region. Equipped with this survey of the strategic landscape, we will then proceed to three issue areas critical for strengthening regional security. Allow me to say a few words about each of these.

The first issue is Integrated Air and Missile Defense, and the proposal to designate the Air & Air Defense Chiefs Conference as the GCC's primary military forum for regional air and missile defense policy.

The second issue is maritime security, which here in the Gulf is vital for not only the regional, but also the global, economy.

I am calling on the GCC to assume and maintain command of the Combined Maritime Force's Gulf operations, CTF-152, which Gulf nations have been participating in since its establishment in 2004. The GCC should also commit to a regular heads-of-navy conference.

Third, we will discuss threats in the digital realm, and cooperation to improve our cyber defenses.

Because we must be proactive in securing vulnerable critical infrastructure, I am proposing a U.S.-GCC Cyber Defense Cooperation Initiative to jump-start our collaboration.

To support closer GCC cooperation across the board, I am also suggesting that the GCC develop a Foreign Military Sales case to consult with U.S. trainers and technical experts, who could help advance regional defense priorities by accelerating the GCC's progress toward greater interoperability and more sophisticated multinational force development.

It would be up to GCC members to assemble this case and determine the appropriate member contributions. But the benefits would resound across the region.

At the conclusion of our dialogue, we should publicly declare our shared resolve, our shared goals, and our shared vision for stronger U.S.-GCC multilateral defense coordination.

We must demonstrate our unity at a critical time. And we must send a message of strength to adversaries.

I want to again thank each of you for joining me in this dialogue, and to reiterate that every one of our nations will benefit from regular engagement and deeper cooperation on the region's pressing security challenges. A book revered in the Arab world, Kalila wa-Dimna, tells us that "cooperation among friends is vital to their survival."

That is the spirit of our efforts today. It should also guide our efforts in the years ahead...as we work together to build a more peaceful and prosperous future.

I look forward to an open and productive dialogue.

Thank you.